

Upper Shields River Watershed Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout Inventory and Brook Trout Suppression

DECISION NOTICE

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
July 2009**

Proposed Action

This proposed action is to conduct a fish community inventory of the upper Shields River watershed and determine the current distribution of Yellowstone cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki bouvieri*). Fisheries workers will sample streams in the project area using standard electrofishing methodologies. All Yellowstone cutthroat trout captured will be measured, weighed, and returned to the stream. Tissue samples comprised of small fin clips may be taken from a subset of captured Yellowstone cutthroat trout to verify genetic status. Workers will identify other native fishes and note their relative abundance. The proposed project will include the mechanical removal of nonnative brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) that are encountered during the inventory. The objective of brook trout suppression is to reduce competition with Yellowstone cutthroat trout over the short term. The results of the fish community inventory will guide development of a more detailed conservation plan to promote long-term persistence of the upper Shields River basin's Yellowstone cutthroat trout population.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment June 24, 2009.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through July 24, 2009). The EA was mailed to 29 individuals and groups, 9 of which were adjacent landowners. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

Summary of Public Comment

One public comment was received during the 30-day review period. The comment was received from a private citizen who did not want to see the removal of brook trout in the Upper Shields. They felt that competition with Yellowstone cutthroat trout was not an issue and that from an angling perspective brook trout are a superior fish to Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

FWP Response: This project proposes to suppress brook trout numbers to reduce competition with Yellowstone cutthroat trout until a more detailed conservation plan for

Yellowstone cutthroat trout can be implemented. Past survey work indicates that brook trout are encroaching into habitat previously only occupied by Yellowstone cutthroat trout and that in some areas they have completely replaced Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Brook trout are present in a number of streams in the Shield River Drainage. Angling and harvest opportunities for brook trout will be reduced in some of the headwater streams as part of this project, but opportunities will remain in a number of other streams in the Shields River Drainage.

Final Environmental Assessment

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based on public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the need to preserve Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the upper Shields River drainage, it is my decision to proceed with the proposed project.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
